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FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Times-News

Twin Falls, Idaho

Sunday Oct. 8, 2017

by Idaho Sen. Lee Heider

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GUEST OPINION: A Republican Perspective: How I plan to keep Idahoans healthy

There are two key areas of focus I will be pursuing during this year's legislative session as a member of the Senate Health and Welfare Committee: the opioid epidemic and Medicaid gap.

Unfortunately, the opioid crisis is not unique to Idaho. It's a national crisis that has increased over the past decades due to over prescribing pain-killing drugs that can be addictive and ripe for overdosing. The lack of proper disposal of dangerous opioid drugs is another unintended consequence of opioids. Last spring, the Idaho legislatures assembled an opioid task force under the direction of the Office of Drug Policy. The task force included representatives from around the state including legislators, health and welfare, law enforcement, Department of Pharmacy, parents, and concerned citizens. For three days we visited this serious epidemic in our state and gained significant insight into this growing issue.

Many doctors prescribe opioid drugs for patients after surgery. Pain management medicine is often necessary but re-prescribing to patients can be a key step into long-term overuse. In other cases, patients have excess medication that can fall into the wrong hands. Opioids can be given or sold to others for generating a state of euphoria. Either scenario can lead to non-patients overdosing or becoming addicted and in many situations causing death.

The solution seems to be threefold: Doctors need to prescribe fewer doses of opioids to relieve pain when applicable; pharmacists need to be able to control prescriptive amounts; and, drugs need to be disposed of properly, so that they are not available to others. This is not a law enforcement issue unless someone overdoses, dies or until someone is selling them on the street.

Idaho is struggling to get an upper hand on this serious issue and we are meeting regularly, exerting all diligence to slow the epidemic of opioid deaths. You can help! Please ensure that you don't have an unused supply of opioids around after your treatment is complete. You may return unused pills to a pharmacy for proper disposal.

The second issue I hope the Health and Welfare Committee will focus on this year is addressing where Idaho is heading relative to Medicaid and closing the Medicaid gap. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for the last few months has been communicating with Idaho and several other Western states regarding this matter. The federal response to us is: You tell us what you want to do and we will help you get it done. It is very refreshing to have the federal government take that positive, inclusive state-driven stand on such an important issue. The departments of Insurance and Health and Welfare, insurance companies, several legislators

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and the governor's office have been meeting to find solutions that help serve the gap population. We plan to apply for federal waivers to help this population bring down medical costs.

Expansion of the Statewide Healthcare Innovation Plan model to help more people in Idaho receive coverage and improve their health outcomes is in the works. We hope to reduce the use of county indigent funding by helping citizens secure a primary care physician who can care for their needs using the patient centered medical home model. In Idaho, four behavioral health crisis centers have been established with, hopefully, more confirmed in this upcoming session. Health crisis centers help those in temporary crisis to have a place to go for medication and health services. The alternative is a trip to an emergency room or possibly jail. These Behavioral Health Centers are reducing the cost of care to those individuals and to the state. Idaho is moving in the right direction to support the long-term health of our citizens. The legislature's partnership with HHS will help us achieve a more positive outcome for Idahoans.

Lee Heider of Twin Falls represents District 24 in the Idaho Senate.

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